

Montana's Natural Lamb Awareness

Location of Project: Reed Point, Montana (Western Region)

Purpose: The primary objectives of this project were to increase product awareness of lamb among consumers in the Billings, Montana area through in-store taste demonstrations in order to increase sales for Montana Natural Lamb (MNL), a business consisting of four producers.

Accomplishments: MNL was awarded funds to conduct an in-store product demonstration program designed to let consumers taste properly cooked, locally-raised lamb. Recipe cards were distributed, cooking tips were provided, and consumers' questions were answered by individuals in charge of the in-store demonstrations. A total of 42 demonstrations were conducted in independent grocery stores during the grant period by MNL representatives.

The most significant result of this demonstration effort was the relationship MNL developed with Walkers Grill located in Billings, MT. The head chef of this downtown high-end restaurant became very excited about the top quality lamb available from

MNL, and he bought all of the lamb racks MNL could supply. The chef had included MNL lamb as a regular item on his menu, but MNL was not able to keep up with demand. He tried substituting lamb from a large food distributor but he was not satisfied with the quality, so he decided to include MNL lamb as a special menu item wherever MNL lamb was available.

The chef also indicated a willingness to buy cuts other than just racks. Because of the significant potential that Walkers Grill represented in terms of lamb sales, MNL gave them 34.5 pounds of lamb ribs to try on their menu. That promotional effort eventually paid off, and Walkers Grill was again buying all the racks of ribs MNL could supply.

However, despite the willingness of Walkers Grill to buy some the lesser quality cuts from a carcass, they could not buy all of them, and therefore the issue of how to market the lesser quality lamb cuts continued to be an issue for MNL. When MNL felt they needed to raise the price of lamb burger from \$2.00 to \$2.50 per pound, the sale of ground lamb at the Good Earth Market, located in Billings, dropped off almost completely from the 60 pounds per month that they had been buying. MNL struggled to figure out

how they could regain this sales volume while maintaining a sufficient profit margin.

Unfortunately, prolonged droughts in Montana also dealt MNL a setback. Its May 2001 rainfall, the wettest month of the year, was the lowest on record at three-tenths of an inch. The lack of grass as a result of the drought put pressure on MNL's producers, making it difficult to predict whether or not they could produce enough lamb to meet demand, particularly with the volume of demand generated by Walkers Grill. During the middle of June 2001, the area received over 3 inches of rain, which helped to turn things around slightly, but the ill effects of the earlier drought were still felt.

Lessons Learned: The demonstrations produced interesting comments from people in the area. Almost half the people that were asked to taste MNL lamb would not even try it. One frequently mentioned reason was that they had tried lamb years ago, and they didn't like it. Other customers expressed an aversion to eating a "cute little lamb." In addition, many of the store's customers who tried the lamb were surprised at how good it tasted, but did not know how to prepare it. Only about a quarter of those who stopped by the in-store

demonstration had had lamb before, liked it, and were happy to see locally-raised lamb available in a store.

The recipe cards were very important to provide an understanding of cooking lamb. Providing MNL contact information on the recipe cards also gave leads to those individual household consumers who might want to buy a whole or half carcass directly from MNL at a later time. The in-store demonstrations helped develop a network of future contacts.

All indications suggest that the hard work involved in carrying out the in-store demonstrations paid off. A representative of MNL approached a grocery store in the small town of Absarokee about conducting in-store sampling programs. Because of previous demonstrations conducted at other stores, the Absarokee grocer was aware of MNL, and agreed to allow demonstrations in his store. He sold 20 pounds of MNL lamb in the first week.

Conclusion:

MNL was generally satisfied with the results of its project. Walkers Grill purchased all of the lamb racks MNL could supply, and locally raised lamb was introduced in six independent grocery stores in the Billings region. These promising results were countered somewhat by the fact that MNL's market penetration of

the retail grocery sector was slow and somewhat difficult. While grocery store sales were strong as long as demonstrations were being conducted, they fell off after demonstrations ceased. The main recommendations from MNL for others contemplating in-store sampling of lamb products were:

- Producers should conduct the demonstrations on-site rather than hire a sampler service. The direct personal interaction between customer and producer is important to convey the quality of the product and to provide cooking tips.
- Building a strong relationship with the grocery store meat department manager is critical when carrying out in-store demonstrations.
- Distribution of recipe cards is critical to the success of demonstration programs for lamb products, due to the fact that many consumers are unfamiliar with cooking lamb.
- Demonstrations performed in the same store should be conducted on different days of the week. This allows producers to reach different people, as the same shoppers tend to come to the grocery store at the same time during the week.